

## **“Can You Start Over, Your Call Dropped...”**

By Public Service Commissioner June Tierney

It’s happened to all of us. Traveling over hill and dale, connecting to a needed service, or getting work done thanks to Bluetooth. And then, nothing. Silence. Blank screens. Your tires roll on as your work comes to a screeching halt... spotty cell service strikes again, leaving you frustrated, lost or unproductive.

Data from the Public Service Department shows that up to 40% percent of Vermonters do not have reliable cell service, and that, as of 2018, 62% of our highways had middling or poor reception, while 10% lacked any kind of coverage at all.

Expanding cellular service in Vermont is a necessity, not a luxury. As a day in Vermont unfolds, countless conversations and activities begin or end with a call, email or web search on a mobile device. This truth is apparent to many who live, work, and travel in our state. It is a truth that stings when we meet the repercussions from missing or losing an important or timely conversation, or for a business that loses out on potential customers or can’t attract new workers.

We know from those living in rural communities that reliable cell service is key to living in their homes for the foreseeable future. Youth – who use their phones for so much of their lives – will not stay in Vermont, and potential newcomers will not relocate here. People need a consistent and reliable telephone connection; many cannot afford both land lines and cell phones.

Essential public services suffer from a lack of cell service, too. Plow drivers and maintenance crews need to be in touch while in the field. Social workers need to reach their clients as they travel the state to check on their health and welfare. Farmers rely on cell service to communicate with customers, take mobile credit card payments, order supplies, call the veterinarian, and arrange for processing or transportation of goods.

Vermont can do better, and with historic federal aid, now is the time to do it. That’s why Governor Scott has proposed spending \$51 million of our state’s federal relief dollars on a program to build cell towers that will substantially extend the coverage along roads and throughout rural communities.

For far too long the state has waited to see if the market and private cell companies will invest in Vermont and fix these gaps, but just like broadband, there comes a time when subsidizing the effort is the only path forward. Because continuing to wait is just putting the communities who lack this essential service further behind.

Alternatively, here’s the good news: by expanding wireless service, along with broadband and the many other infrastructure needs Governor Scott has proposed for rural economic development, we can transform these communities and create economic vibrancy that will

attract – rather than deter – more private investment in the future. So next time there is a new technology, the market leaps at the opportunity to invest in rural Vermont.

That's exactly what this investment is – an investment in the future, where we expand economic equity to all regions of the state, and help our rural communities strengthen their economic foundation while keeping their rural character.

Which is why it's also important to note that this proposal has a much better, more robust community engagement process because we know this should be a collaborative process with local voices involved. And we have a rigorous regulatory process that appropriately considers and protects our health, our natural resources and ensures cell towers are sited in a manner that maintains the integrity of Vermont's environment and the natural beauty of the communities that host them.

With federal funding now available, this is our chance to invest wisely in expanding cell service so our citizens can have the basic tools they need to be safe, be in touch, and to collectively advance Vermont's economic future. But seizing our chance means we can't keep standing on old, familiar objections. We must make smart choices if we are going to move forward, to a better place where cell service is reliable and readily accessible in our everyday lives. The need to expand cell service in Vermont is monumental. The cost of not expanding service is unacceptable.

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